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Renee Jones
Liberty University

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Book Review

Vital Christian Community: 12 Characteristics of Healthy Congregations

By Phil Brochard and Alissa Newton
Church Publishing, 2022
240 pages
US$23.99

Reviewed by Renee Jones, widowed after 42 years of marriage, a mother of 3, grandmother of 12, and great-grandmother of 10. Renee is a DMin Student at Liberty University and has served in various ministerial capacities.

Many churches are going through the post-pandemic recovery of worship attendance and participation. Vital Christian Community: 12 Characteristics of Healthy Congregations will help pastors, including myself, to refocus and revitalize their congregations. Phil Brochard and Alissa Newton bring their expertise to the forefront in a comprehensible narrative. Both authors are rectors of the Episcopalian church who share their passion for the church, skills, and experience. Brochard, the rector of All Souls Episcopal Parish and a trainer with the College for Congregational Development, brings his belief that health is not a static state of being but a series of intentions, behaviors, and practices resulting from a vital and healthy community. Newton is the vicar of St. Columba’s Episcopal Church and co-founder of the College for Congregational Development and has worked throughout the United States. “The goal of the College began with one aim: to equip lay and clergy leaders with the frameworks and the practical skills to develop or redevelop their congregations” (ix). This book reflects that goal as it uses stories,
examples, and principles to demonstrate how a congregation can be healthy if it achieves the twelve characteristics described in the book.

The foundation of the twelve characteristics is also the first characteristic: a sense of purpose. The authors give pastors the understanding that revisiting their church’s purpose is the key to becoming a healthy congregation. The old method of opening church doors or simply having a building with services on Sunday is not a sufficient purpose to build or sustain a faith community. The first core development model (Gather-Transform-Send) is introduced to help congregations articulate their purpose. The basic purpose is to gather God’s people in a community to be a site of transformation and renewal through worship and congregational life together and then to send God’s people out into a world that needs them as salt, light, and leaven.

The subsequent characteristics build on the church’s sense of purpose. They include being reliably transformational, practitionership, the ability to trust, curiosity, responsiveness, reflection, openness to change, collaboration, productivity in conflict, being emotionally grounded, and having self-differentiated leadership. These characteristics have proven vital for many pastors whose hopelessness and helplessness result from their ego or efforts to make changes by themselves. The book’s central focus is the congregants’ interaction and ownership of becoming a vital and healthy congregation.

A practical guideline that I found particularly resourceful for pastors is the importance of being open to change. The pastor is not to be the savior, sole driver, or only person to make change happen. The authors make it clear that no change happens unless multiple people work on it and for it.

The authors also promote an online retreat focusing on the 12 characteristics, where congregants are exposed to the core purpose of the Gather-Transform-Send model. This model is consistently applied throughout the book, with practical guidelines for implementation.

The fundamental way the 12 characteristics are explained to reach congregants on every level is one of the book’s notable strengths. Although the authors speak to leaders of every denomination, they reference their Episcopalian faith frequently. One review on the book’s back cover from The Rev. Canon Stephanie Spellers notes, “Vital Christian Community offers churches of every kind access to clear, tested practices and pathways toward authentic, transformed life with Jesus and with each other.”

Another strength is the practical application of the characteristics through exercises that include the whole congregation. This helps to promote interaction among the congregants who are re-adapting to physical
gatherings. While congregations may benefit from the exercises presented with each of the twelve characteristics, some may not be appropriate to all congregations. For the congregants in my faith community, the exercise on the Johari Window (Chapter 5) was not as useful as the other exercises.

For pastors recovering from a tragic decline in church attendance due to the COVID-19 restrictions, this is a must-read to motivate them to revisit their church’s purpose. Readers who come hoping for change in their congregation will not be disappointed by the information and insight gained from these authors, which will provide them with lenses for development. Whether starting with a new congregation or revitalizing a seasoned group, this book will aid your church in discovering and developing a core purpose.